

Christmas Cookies

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CHRISTMAS COOKIES

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BLURB:

Cookie Detrick loves her small-town life. She planned on spending the holiday season making her bakery a place where the community can come for good treats and a good time. All was well in her world until an unexpected encounter with an overly aggressive stranger changed her day. To make things more complicated, Cookie discovered the stranger was her friend's brother.

Miles Baxter left town years ago, chasing dreams in the big city. Now back with a renewed sense of purpose, he's determined to prove he's more than the pushy guy Cookie remembers.

Will the holiday spirit and the help from a friend be enough to give Cookie a new start for Christmas?



Chapter One

The warm smell of gingerbread filled the air as Cookie walked from the kitchen to the front of the store. She slid the first tray of tiny men into the display case and then returned to the back room to get another. An empty bag of gumdrops on the table caught her eye. She looked at the calendar with a frown.

“Crap. The shipment won’t be here until Saturday,” she muttered, picking up the tray.

Just as she bent to place the batch of peppermint brownies into the case, the bell over the door jingled. She stood with a smile.

“Oh, there she is! The world’s best cookie maker!” a customer said, stepping up to the counter.

“She certainly is the queen of cookies!” another customer exclaimed standing beside the first.

“Aww, you guys are so sweet. Thank you, Mrs. Thompson, Ms. Ellen. How are you today?”

“Jack Frost is nipping at more than just noses out there today, dear. My old bones can’t stand this cold,” Mrs. Thompson said with a wave of her hand.

Cookie muffled her laughter. “Yeah, with Christmas right around the corner, the chill is definitely in the air.”

“It’s that wind for me, Cookie. No matter how many layers you add, the wind just seems to cut right through them to freeze your skin,” Ms. Ellen added, with an exaggerated shiver.

Cookie chuckled. “And the combination is just brutal, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” the women agreed in unison and then laughed.

Cookie laughed with them. “Well, I can’t do anything about that cold wind, but maybe I can warm your spirit a bit. What can I get for you today?”

“I’d like my usual batch of sugar cookies for my work mates,” Mrs. Thompson said and then she took an obvious sniff of the air. “Let me get some of those peppermint brownies, too. They smell heavenly,” she added, tapping the case lightly.

Cookie nodded. “Coming right up.” She grabbed a box and opened the case. “What can I get for you, Ms. Ellen?”

Ms. Ellen leaned on the counter. “The gingerbread cookies, of course! I don’t know what you put in them, Cookie, but every bite tastes like Christmas.”

Cookie beamed. “Well, you know, a little ginger, a little sugar, a little bit of love and a whole lot of Christmas cheer,” she explained with a giggle.

Mrs. Thompson gave her a knowing smile. “Honey, you put more than love and Christmas cheer into your treats—you put magic! Too bad you couldn’t enter those into that contest. Remember the contest during the summer, Ellen? Don’t you think Cookie would’ve won with those gingerbread cookies?”

“Absolutely. She was robbed, anyway. I mean, sure, Desiree’s Delights makes the best donuts and croissants, but they can’t touch Cookie’s cookies.”

Mrs. Thompson swatted at her friend. “Hush Ellen, you’re going to make Cookie feel bad.”

Ms. Ellen’s hand went to her mouth. “Oh dear. Cookie, I didn’t mean any—”

“Oh no, Ms. Ellen,” Cookie said with a wave of her hand. “I’m okay. I was happy being runner up. Desiree’s has been open longer and more people know about her bakery. Besides, just being in the contest brought a lot of new customers my way.”

“We know where the best cookies in town are, and we tell everyone we know.”

Ms. Ellen put her hands on her hips. “Besides, everyone knew your cookies were the real winner. Desiree won for her name alone,” Ms. Ellen added with an eye roll.

“Exactly,” Mrs. Thompson agreed.

A warm sensation filled her spirit as she wrapped up their orders. Cookie handed over their packages and smiled.

“You guys are the best. Truly. Thank you for believing in me and for keeping me in business,” she added with a wink.

“You’ll always have us, dear,” Mrs. Thompson said, cupping her cheek. “Merry Christmas,” the ladies said in unison as they left the store. Cookie looked up at the clock and nodded.

“Okay, my early birds are gone. Now I’ve got time to make a quick run to the store.”

She locked the front door, flipped her sign and ran out the back door. The grocery store down the street was bustling with holiday shoppers. Lost in her mental list, Cookie moved through the crowd just barely missing a collision with a shopping cart coming around the corner.

“Excuse me. That was my fault.”

The male voice brought her from her thoughts. Slowly she looked up to see the tall, handsome stranger eyeing her.

“Oh, umm, no problem.”

She turned her cart to go around him, but he repositioned his to block her. “I couldn’t help but notice how nice you look,” the man said with a smile.

Cookie looked down at her simple brown coat and crochet scarf. “Umm, thank you.”

She backed up and turned her cart again. The man put his hand on her cart to stop its movement. Cookie turned a raised brow to him. He quickly removed his hand and raised them both in surrender.

“My apologies. I was just wondering if I could maybe take you out for some coffee or maybe hot chocolate,” he asked with a grin.

“Uh, thanks, but I’m actually in a bit of a rush, so no thank you.”

“Oh, come on. It’s Christmas, you know, good will toward men and all that,” he replied, his grin growing as he positioned himself between her and the shelves. “What do you say?”

Cookie gave a slight chuckle, hoping it would diffuse the situation. “Thanks, but really, I’m just here to grab a few things for my bakery...and nothing else.”

Seemingly missing her hint, he stepped closer. “Okay, okay, I can see you’re busy. How about I give you my number and when you—”

“No, thanks,” Cookie interjected quickly and sidestepped him to move down the aisle. “Merry Christmas!” she said without a backwards glance.



“HOW MANY MORE DECORATIONS are you trying to hang in here? There *is* such a thing as overkill you know.”

Cookie giggled, taking the other end of the twinkling lights, her friend offered.

“There is no such thing as overkill when it comes to Christmas, Leo,” she told him.

Together they hung the lights around the counter and then added sprigs of holly and pine garlands. Cookie stepped back to admire their work.

“Now it’s starting to look like Christmas in here.”

Leo sputtered. “This place already looked like Christmas, girl. Now it’s looking more like Christmas has thrown up in here.”

“Well, we’re going to have to agree to disagree on that one. Besides, it needs a few more touches,” she concluded with a dismissive wave.

Leo chuckled and handed her a tiny Christmas tree out of the box before them.

“You won’t believe what happened at the grocery store today, Leo,” she mentioned.

“What happened?”

“Some guy pushed up on me and wouldn’t take no for an answer. Like, really wouldn’t take no,” she said, putting the tree at the end of the countertop.

Leo smirked. “Huh? Was he handsome?”

“Yes, but also extremely annoying,” she told him with an eye roll.

Leo shook his head. “Sounds like a man that doesn’t get to hear ‘no’ very often. Probably used to women falling for his charms and handsome face.”

“Yeah, well, it takes more than a pretty face to win me over.”

“Uh huh, well I wouldn’t worry about it, though. You might not see him again, anyway. It’s the holidays. He might just be visiting someone,” Leo added with a shrug.

Cookie grinned, finally starting to feel better. “Yeah, you might be right.”

“Of course, I am. If you’re going to be meeting people, you should be meeting someone like my older brother.”

Cookie lifted a brow. “Your brother? Didn’t he move away years ago?”

“Uh huh, but he’s coming back. Miles has a decent job, he doesn’t do drugs, good credit and half a brain. Oh, and you already know good looks run in the family,” he added with a laugh.

Cookie lifted the empty box as she laughed with him. “As good as that sounds, I’m not really interested in dating right now.”

He followed her to the back room. “Fine, but my brother is coming in on Friday. He took a job back in town, so he’ll stay with me until he finds an apartment or rents a house. I’ll bring him by when he gets here to introduce you.”

“Wait a minute, Leo. I didn’t say all that.”

“All what? I’m talking about an introduction, not marriage,” he said, waving away her comment. “Don’t let that jerk from the supermarket stop you from meeting a good guy.”

She sighed. “You’re right, Leo. I shouldn’t be letting some random encounters get to me.”

“Exactly, and hey, if you meet up with him again, I’m sure we can both take him,” he said, giving her a playful nudge.

As they laughed and her irritation at the situation melted away in the face of Leo’s easy-going humor.



Chapter Two

“Cookie! Where you at, girl? I’m here with my brother!” Leo called out.
“Be right there! Just putting some empty trays in the back!”

Cookie returned to the front of the store and froze. Somehow, she managed to keep her jaw from dropping as she returned to the counter.

“Cookie, this is my brother, Miles! Miles, this is my girl, Cookie. A sister in all but blood.”

She scoffed. “Leo, *this guy* is your brother?”

“Yeah. I told you he was coming to town on Friday. What’s wrong?” Miles groaned.

She pointed at Miles. “Leo, this is the guy I told you about. The one from the grocery store!”

Leo looked at Miles, then burst into laughter. “No way! That couldn’t have been my brother. He just got here this morning. Right?”

Miles looked between the two of them. “Technically, yes, but that *was* me in the supermarket.”

“Wait, what?” Leo exclaimed.

“I only came to take a look at another place. I stopped at the store while I was here.”

“So, you were the pushy guy that wouldn’t take no for an answer,” Leo confirmed with a tsk.

Miles dragged his hand over his face. “Yeah, about that, sorry for acting like a jerk, Cookie.”

Leo shook his head and sighed. “Well, it sounds like you’ve got your work cut out for you to make up for that lousy first impression.”

“Mm hmm,” Cookie agreed, wrapping her arms around her chest.

“Let’s go get you settled in, Miles. I’ll call you later, Cookie.”

Leo waved as he headed for the door. Miles followed leaving her with a sad look over his shoulder. Cookie shook her head and continued to close the store.



COOKIE SLID A FRESH tray of molasses cookies into the display case as the bells rang. She smiled and looked up expecting one of her regulars. Her smile faded quickly when realized it wasn't.

"Oh, it's just you, Miles," she said, bringing her attention back to the display. "Yeah, I guess I made a pretty bad first impression the other day, didn't I?" She gave him a look over the counter. "I'd say that's putting it mildly."

He chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Fair enough. Look, I just want to officially apologize. I was out of line and way too pushy."

"Uh huh," she said, without looking up. "Hold that thought." Cookie went to the back and returned with a tray of undecorated cookies. "You were saying?"

"I— Well, I was trying to apologize."

"Oh, yes. Please continue."

"Oh, umm, right. Yes, I really am sorry. I was acting like a pushy jerk."

"That you were. What was your deal anyway?"

Miles moved closer to the case. "I— Well, I saw a beautiful woman and didn't want to lose the opportunity to get to know her."

"Huh, is that so?" she asked in monotone.

"I— Well— Hmm, I can see this isn't going to be easy. Can we just start over?"

Cookie put the finished cookies into the case then eyed him skeptically. "Hmm, well, you are Leo's brother, so okay. Apology accepted."

"Awesome! Okay, my name is Miles Baxter," he said, extending his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

"My name is Cassandra Detrick, but my friends call me Cookie," she shared, giving his hand a shake. "Look, Miles, I'm really busy at the moment, so..."

"Say no more. I get it," he said quickly, taking a small step back. "I won't take up anymore of your time. I just wanted to say that and, well, hope you have a good day."

With a small nod, he turned and left. Cookie stared at the door for a few minutes with a raised brow before returning to her work.



SHARP KNOCKING TOOK Cookie's attention away from frosting the sugar cookies before her. She looked up to see Miles waving frantically outside the window.

What the—

"Good morning," Miles said when she opened the door.

Good morning. You know I don't open for another half hour."

"Yes, I know, but I thought I'd come by with a peace offering to start your day," he said, offering her a cup.

"Does this peace offering come with no other expectations?" she asked, with a raised brow.

"Well, none but the hope that you might give me some advice."

When she hesitated, Miles waved the cup before her. The warm smell of her favorite scents waft around her. She smiled and took the cup from him.

"Alright. Come in." She paused to take a sip then returned to her spot behind the counter. "Hmm, French vanilla. I see you questioned your brother on how I like my coffee."

"Well, it wouldn't be much of a *peace* offering if I didn't get the order right," he said, with a sly grin.

She couldn't help but chuckle. "Fair enough. What kind of advice do you need?"

He leaned on the counter, a glint of mischief in his eye. "I need to know which of your cookies would go best with my coffee. I figured you are the best one to ask."

His words sent a warm flush to her face. "Oh, okay. Well, are you drinking French vanilla also?"

"No, I'm actually drinking a gingerbread latte."

"Nice. Okay, do you like it hard or soft?"

"Hmm, I don't think anyone's ever asked me that," he said with a laugh. "Really? I ask that question all the time," she said with a laughing grin. Miles laughed. "I bet. Is there a difference to the experience?"

"A little. If you liked hard cookies I'd recommend the shortbread cookie. Their mild flavor wouldn't overwhelm the bold spices of the gingerbread. The almond biscotti's mild flavor would work, too," she explained, pointing to each cookie. "And both are perfect for dunking," she added with a wink.

Miles nodded. "And if I were a soft cookie kind of guy?"

Cookie smiled as she moved to the other side of the case.

“In that case, these molasses cookies would be good. The cinnamon and ginger in them match your drink.”

Miles looked between his options and then smiled at her.

“You really know your craft. I will take the almond biscotti. From the way your eyes lit up, I get the impression that *you’re* a dunker, too,” he accused with a sly grin.

Cookie giggled. “I plead the fifth. We are discussing your likes at the moment, after all. So, the almond biscotti for you?”

“Actually, I’ll take the almond *and* the molasses. I will dunk with this cup and try the molasses with another cup later.”

“Both? That’s a lot of sweetness in one day. Are you sure you can handle it?”

He winked. “I’m sure going to try. Do we have time to finish our coffee while I test my theory?”

“Yes, I think we do.”



COOKIE LAID HER COAT on one of the chairs in the sitting area. She turned off the lights around the display case then moved to the front window. She watched the snow fall for a few moments and then shrieked when someone suddenly appeared before her.

“Miles, you scared me half to death!” she scolded, swinging the door open. “Sorry, Cookie.”

“It’s fine. I think my heart is returning to normal,” she chuckled, going back to the sitting area. “What can I do for you?”

She picked up her coat, but Miles took it from her. He urged her to turn and then helped her into it.

“Oh, well thank you.”

“I didn’t mean to scare you. I just came by to see if it would be alright to walk you home?”

She couldn’t help the small smile that broke through, but she pushed it away when she turned around.

“You’re being very persistent, Miles.”

“Some would call it dedication,” he replied with a grin.

“And what are you dedicated to?”

“To showing you that I'm not that jerk you first encountered last week, of course.”

Cookie nodded and locked the door behind them. “I see. Well, I don't live that far so that doesn't give you much time,” she told him leading the way.

Miles laughed. “So, you're saying snap to it?”

Cookie shrugged. “You catch on quick. Leo did say you had half a brain.”

“Oh, he always says that.”

“I think he meant it as a compliment. You know how Leo is.”

“Yeah, I know. He's been saying that since that Christmas when we were kids.”

“Oh? What happened when you were kids?”

“Well,” he began, glancing at her. “I might have been about ten, so Leo was probably seven or eight. Our parents set up this huge Christmas display in our front yard, with Santa, the reindeer, candy canes, you know, the whole shebang. I had the genius idea to help ‘improve’ the display. We snuck out one night to rearrange everything while our parents were asleep.”

Cookie laughed, covering her mouth with her glove. “Oh no. This doesn't sound like it ended well.”

“I thought it'd be hilarious to put Santa in one of the front leading the reindeer and have Rudolph sitting on the sleigh in his place. I told Leo to hold on to Santa while I put Rudolph in place,” he said, chuckling at the memory. “Anyway, a good wind stirred up and Leo almost lost his grip on Santa. When I turned around the gust was pushing him across the snow-covered grass, almost lifting Leo's ninety pounds into the air. I grabbed him by the feet screaming at the top of my lungs for our parents. We were in the neighbor's yard two houses over when they finally came out and saved us.”

Cookie held onto a nearby lamppost to laugh. “Oh my gosh! Why didn't he just simply let go?”

“He had wrapped the strings we used to tie Santa down around his wrists so he could hold it better. It was all tangled around his hand. He said it was pulling him too fast for him to get it off,” he explained with a shrug.

“Wow. Did you get in a lot of trouble when your parents found out?” she asked, muffling her laughter.

“Not too much,” he recalled. “Our mom couldn’t stop laughing, so I got off pretty easy,” he finished with a smile.

They continued walking, passing a toy store with an intricately decorated gingerbread house with toy soldiers all around it in the window.

“Did you make that gingerbread house for them? It looks like the one in your store window.”

“Uh huh. Mr. Douglas thought it would help the display of toy soldiers to be sold if they had a house to guard.”

“Nice. You’ve got skills, that’s for sure. Have you always wanted to open a bakery?” he asked.

“Well, I grew up with my grandmother and she loved to bake. She was that lady that everyone looked for to make all the cakes, cookies, cupcakes, anything for any type of sale or fundraiser. The love for baking is in my blood.”

“Your grandma sounds like an awesome woman, Cookie.”

“Yeah, she was great. Grandma Beverly taught me that baking wasn’t just about the cookies and brownies. It was about sharing your love for baking with the people you love. When she died, she left me her home and enough money to open the bakery.”

“I think your grandmother would be proud of you.”

Cookie stopped walking to look up at him. “You think so?”

“Absolutely. I think you’re making her very proud with not just the skill she flourished within you but with the money she left you. Your business is doing well.”

There was no mockery in his gaze, only a quiet sincerity that made her feel at ease. For the first time since they met, her guard started to see him differently.

“Thank you, Miles,” she said softly. “I really appreciate that.”

His warm smile reached his eyes when he nodded and picked up a step beside her again. They continued walking in comfortable silence.

“Thank you for letting me walk you home,” he said when she stopped again before the blue snow-covered house.

“Thank you for wanting to walk me home. Goodnight, Miles.” Miles lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles. “Good night, Cookie.”

She left Miles on the sidewalk as she went to her door. Before she went into the house, she turned to face him again.

“Miles, I’m doing a Christmas gathering at my store the day after tomorrow. It’s for patrons to sample some upcoming new pastries and have a good time. They’ll be hors d’oeuvres, drinks and a few specialties I am cooking up. I’m not expecting many people to show up, but I would like you to come...if you’re free, of course.”

Miles's eyes widened. “I’d– I’d love to. Do I need a ticket or something?”

“I think an exclusive invitation from the owner can get you in,” she said with a wink and then went inside.



Chapter Three

“Can I have another, Leo?”

“Back again, Mr. Willis? You really like this Moscato d’Asti, huh?” Leo teased, as he refilled the glass.

Mr. Willis chuckled. “What can I say, Leo? The food, the drink, the charm of the atmosphere, if this bakery gets any cozier, I might have to stay the night!”

“Well, we can’t have that, Mr. Willis. Where would you sleep, on the shelf with my gingerbread men?” Cookie teased, arriving beside him.

Mr. Willis laughed. “I suppose not.” He lifted his glass to her as he returned to his table.

“Leo, you’re doing a wonderful job. Thanks so much for offering to be bartender for the evening.”

“Of course! You know I’m here for you whenever you need me. Although I admit I didn’t think it would be like this. It’s a bit more crowded than you expected, isn’t it?”

Cookie scanned the room. “Uh huh, but it’s fine. It’s fine. I’m fine. Everything’s fine.”

Leo chuckled. “Are you sure you’re fine?”

“Cookie! Cookie! Over here, dear!”

Cookie lifted a glass from the bar and emptied it in two gulps.

“Yup, fine. Well, back to mingling,” she said leaving Leo’s muffled laughter behind.

“Hello, Mrs. Thompson, Ms. Ellen. Thanks for coming.”

“Oh, we wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” Mrs. Thompson waved away her words. “Your bakery is turning into a wonderful spot to come and relax to enjoy good food.”

“This party is perfect, Cookie!” Ms. Ellen exclaimed. “The decor is absolutely exquisite, full of Christmas charm and elegance. You’ve done a wonderful job.”

“And these treats! I swear I could just live on these cranberry scones!” Mrs. Thompson added, picking up the treat.

“Thank you, Mrs. Thompson. I tried to keep the food choice festive, but still cozy,” Cookie said, beaming. The chimes on the door made her look up. Butterflies danced in her stomach, and she smiled. “Ladies, will you excuse me?”

“Of course, Cookie. Continue to mingle with your people.”

“Now, Cookie,” Mrs. Jensen asked, as she passed by. “Who is your bartender? He is absolutely delightful.”

“Oh, that’s my friend Leo. He offered to help me tonight. Will you excuse me?”

“Well, he’s a keeper, dear!” Mrs. Jensen winked. “Not just anyone would pitch in like that, you know.”

“Oh no, he’s not that kind of friend. He’s more like the brother I never had. Would you excuse me?”

“Cookie, you’ve outdone yourself,” said Mrs. Yates, sampling a bite of cheesecake. “It looks like something out of a Christmas movie in here!”

“Thanks!” she said, continuing to the door. “Miles,” she greeted him, slightly breathless. “Glad you could make it.”

He grinned. “I wouldn’t have missed it. You look beautiful.”

The flutter intensified and she smiled. “Thank you, Miles. You look very nice, too.”

Miles scanned the room. “Looks like the party is going well.”

“Yes, it’s actually going a little *too* well. There are way more people here than I expected would come.”

“Well, you’ve got Leo and if you like, you have me, too. What can I do?”

Cookie started to protest, but as she glanced around the room. Seeing the smiling faces and hearing the jovial laughter made her smile, but the sight of the half empty trays and bottles piling up made her sigh.

“Yes, thank you. If you could grab the empty trays that would be great. I will get more from the back and meet you at the counter. Once they are refilled, we can get some bottles over to Leo, so he doesn’t run out.”

Miles nodded then gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before heading to the dining area. Cookie gasped and then she touched her cheek briefly before hurrying off.

Miles had the trays on the countertop when she returned. They refilled them and returned to the party with a few bottles of wine.

“Here you go Leo,” she said, handing him the bottles.

“You look less frazzled, Cookie. Has Mile's arrival helped some?” Leo asked, with a teasing grin.

She turned. Miles moved about charming her guests with his friendly banter. Cookie felt her cheeks warm when Miles sent her look from across the room.

Mrs. Henderson's wave caught her eye, removing her from a trance.

“I'll be right back.”

“Cookie, your new boyfriend is a darling,” Mrs. Henderson announced when she appeared at the table.

“And he's very handsome, too,” Ms. Ellen added with a giggle.

The warmth returned to her cheeks. She blinked, feeling a mix of embarrassment and...glee.

“Oh no, it's not like that with Miles. We're just friends, new friends, actually,” she protested.

Mrs. Henderson reached for her hand. “I've seen how that man looks at you. A man who has interest in you and your endeavors is a keeper, dear,” Mrs. Henderson added with a wink.

Miles caught her eye again. He grinned as if he knew exactly what Mrs. Henderson was saying.

“Hmm, thank you ladies. I will keep that in mind.”



“THANK YOU, MILES, REALLY. I don't know what I would've done without you tonight,” she said, as he put the last of the trash out.

Miles shrugged; his smile softened as he looked at her. “Thanks for inviting me.” He took a step back, looking around the now-empty shop with a satisfied smile. “It was quite an evening.”

“Thanks to you,” she admitted. “You were extremely helpful all around and everyone loved meeting you.”

His eyes locked on hers. “I'm finding the more time I spend with you, the more I *want* to do for you.”

The heat from his gaze melted something inside her. She took a step closer to him and smiled when he did the same. “I— I was just wondering...”

“Yes,” he inquired softly.

Feeling his breath on her face as he leaned closer made her heart race.

“Since you were such a good help to me, I wondered what...can I do for you?”

Miles tilted his head. “I’m sure we could come up with—”

“A drink for the hostess!” Leo interrupted walking into the room.

Startled, Cookie took a step back. “Oh, yes, thank you,” she said, taking a glass, he offered. “You were amazing tonight, Leo. Thank you for all your help.”

“The Baxter brothers will always be available to help you, Cookie. “Ain’t that right, Miles?”

Miles turned to Cookie and sighed. “It’s clear that Leo needs to work on his subtlety. However, I do agree with his toast idea. To Cookie,” he said, lifting his glass. “The most beautiful baker in town. May the success of this gathering soar your business for years to come.”

They clinked their glasses together and drank.

“Well, this is where I make my exit,” Leo said as he downed his drink. “I’ll call you tomorrow, Cookie and Miles...” he gave him an exaggerated wink then patted him on the shoulder before leaving. “Do your thing.”

Miles groaned.

Cookie giggled. “Wow...subtle.”

Miles chuckled and shook his head. “I did say he needed to work on that.”

Cookie laughed. “It’s okay. I’m familiar with Leo’s less than subtle behavior,” she told him then took another sip.

“Well, before Leo interrupted us, you were wondering how to thank me for helping you tonight. I have a way, if you’re interested.”

Cookie swallowed and took a deep breath. “Okay. What did you have in mind?”

“Leo tells me that they’re still doing the tree lighting ceremony on the twentieth of the month. When we were kids, it was the unofficial start to Christmas week. Would you like to go with me to watch?”

A sense of excitement washed over her. Cookie released a breath she didn’t realize she was holding and smiled.

“I’d love to.”



Chapter Four

Twinkling lights adorned the lampposts and trees in the park as Cookie and Miles walked the pathway leading to the town square. Children laughed throwing snowballs at each other as they passed by. The snow crunched under the feet of families and couples that moved toward the massive Christmas tree. Cookie pulled her scarf higher to block the crisp air blowing against her neck. She turned to Miles when she heard him chuckle.

“Mmm, do you smell that?” Miles asked.

“What?”

She sniffed the air, but Miles continued before she could say anything.

“Roasted chestnuts, cinnamon, hot chocolate...mmm, doesn't that just scream Christmas?” he said with a giddy laugh. “Look, there's a cart. Let's get some hot chocolate,” he added, grabbing her hand.

Cookie smiled letting Miles pull her away.

“Merry Christmas! Can I get you a cup?” the vendor asked.

“Yes, please. Cookie?” Miles said, looking at her for confirmation. “Yes, I'll have a cup, too.”

“Two cups,” Miles said, holding up two fingers.

They strolled the area side by side. The steaming cup warmed her hands as they continued through the crowd.

“You know,” Miles began, his breath forming small clouds in the cold air. “I've always wondered how you would decorate a tree that big. Do you think they used a crane to get up there or just a big ladder?”

Cookie tilted her head as she eyed the tree. “Not according to Mrs. Parker.”

Miles looked at her. “Mrs. Parker?”

Cookie nodded. “Uh huh, she was our neighbor. She used to tell the kids in the neighborhood it was a team of elves standing on each other's shoulders,” she mentioned with a laughing grin.

Miles laughed. “That's an option I hadn't considered.”

As they walked around the tree, Mrs. Henderson and Ms. Ellen waved excitedly to get their attention.

“Cookie, darling!” Mrs. Henderson exclaimed, meeting up with them.

“Hi Mrs. Henderson, Ms. Ellen. Nice to see you.”

“Lovely to see you, too, dear, and with that charming young man from the Christmas party. Miles, isn’t it?”

“Yes, ma’am. How are you, Mrs. Henderson?”

Ms. Ellen pointed playfully at them. “You two look just lovely together.”

“Thank you, Ms. Ellen, but I believe that when you’re in the company of beautiful women it makes you look good,” he said, with a wink to them.

“Oh, my goodness. So poetic,” Ms. Ellen said, giggling like a schoolgirl.

“We’ll be off now. You two enjoy your evening.”

Mrs. Henderson pulled Ms. Ellen away. Cookie glanced at Miles.

“You really know how to charm them, don’t you?”

“Only when I mean it,” he said with a soft smile.

His words made her feel warm all over despite the cold air around them. Before she could reply, the mayor’s voice boomed over the speakers.

“Ladies and gentlemen, it’s time to start the countdown to the five days of Christmas!”

The crowd erupted into cheers and excitement. Cookie and Miles turned their attention to the towering tree along with everyone else.

“Ten, nine, eight...”

The voices of the crowd grew louder with each number.

“Seven, six, five, four...”

Miles grabbed her hand and turned an excited grin to her. She giggled and joined him for the final countdown.

“Three!”

Blinking lights abruptly lit up the bottom of the tree. The crowd took in a collective breath as the flickering rainbow lights danced over them and across the snow. Their faces were illuminated by the warm glow as the crowd clapped.

“Two!” Cookie and Miles shouted excitedly with everyone else.

The midsection of the tree lit up next causing the people to gasp again. Bright white lights flickered off and on. The crowd clapped as the lights moved across the nearby buildings.

“One!” the people cried out in unison.

The top of the tree burst to life in a dazzling display alternating rainbow and white lights with a large, glittery gold and white star on top. Firecrackers sailed upward with a loud whistle bursting into red and blue sparkles against the night sky. The crowd yelped in surprise and then cheers, and loud clapping filled the air. The mayor raised his hands calling for silence.

“The park will be open for a little while longer. There will be music playing, food for sale and the shops around the park will be open until late. Please enjoy yourselves this evening and Merry Christmas!”

Lively Christmas tunes immediately followed the mayor's words. People around them started to sing and dance and Miles led the way to a nearby bench. They drank their drinks quietly watching the lights.

“It's beautiful, isn't it? This was one of the things I missed most when I left town,” Miles said gesturing toward the tree after a while.

“No tree lighting ceremony in the big city?” Cookie said with a chuckle.

Miles smiled. “I'm sure they did something similar, but there were so many other things to do in a bigger city during the Christmas season. Something as simple and beautiful as this gets lost in the hustle and bustle of city life.”

Cookie nodded and put her hand gently on Miles's arm.

“I've had a great time with you tonight, Miles, but I really should be getting home. The bakery opens early, you know. Do you mind walking me home?”

“Not at all,” he replied with a smile.

They strolled along the path, the glow of holiday lights reflecting off the snow-dusted sidewalks lighting their way through the park as they went.

“Did you like living in the city better than our small town?”

“It was okay, but I don't know. At the time I was fresh out of school and thought I needed more than this town could give me,” Miles admitted. “I wanted to be challenged in ways I couldn't be here.”

Cookie nodded. “I get that. So, where did you go?”

“Not far at all, actually, just a few hours away up to Chicago. I got a job at Eat This, Not That.”

“The magazine?”

“Mm hmm.”

“I've seen it on the stands before. Good recipes. You didn't like it?”

"It wasn't glamorous at first, but when you're a glorified coffee runner you learn a lot. People show you all kinds of things when they don't want to work," he mentioned with a laugh.

"I bet. How long did you stay there?" she asked.

"About five years," he replied. "I moved up in the company and my degree helped me move around to different departments, but..." He paused, to shrug. "Chicago had its good points, but it wasn't home. When I saw an opening at my current company I jumped on it. The position itself is in Indianapolis, but that's just a forty-minute drive away. I can live here and come home every day."

"So, you planned on coming back all along?"

"Always," Miles said firmly. "I needed the city experience to grow, but I knew I'd come back home one day. This town is a part of me and now I feel like it was destiny."

Cookie turned a raised brow toward him.

"I'm home in time for the holidays with a new job just in time to meet *you*," he explained, answering her unasked query.

Cookie couldn't help but smile. They walked in silence for a moment as larger snowflakes started to fall around them.

"You and Leo grew up here, too, but I didn't meet Leo until a few years ago. That's rare in a small town."

"Yeah. It's probably because Leo and I went to Catholic school until we graduated high school. Lots of fun that was."

Cookie chuckled in the face of his sarcasm.

"Cookie, I've been meaning to ask you something."

"Okay. Ask away."

"Well, my job's New Year's party is coming up, and I don't know anyone there yet. It'll mean a lot to me if you came with me. I'd hate to spend the whole party being that awkward guy standing in the corner eating shrimp cocktail alone."

Cookie laughed. "You don't seem like the type to be awkward at a party. Especially after seeing you at my Christmas gathering."

"That was totally different," he started, waving away her comment. "My brother was there, you were there, and it was a small get together," he said with a chuckle. "This is a *company* affair. Everyone will be there. That'll mean a lot of unknown faces coming at me, so I'd seriously love for you to help me navigate that."

She hesitated for a moment, but something in his easy warmth made her nod.

“Alright, I’ll go, but if you embarrass me, I’m leaving you with the shrimp,” she said, poking his arm.

He turned a wide and boyish grin to her. “Deal.”



COOKIE'S EYES WIDENED when she walked into the banquet hall. Shimmering gold and silver streamers hung along the walls, tiny twinkling stars wrapped around the windows, and a massive Christmas tree glittered in the corner.

“Wow. It's beautiful.”

“Not as beautiful as you are. Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?”

“Yes, but feel free to say it as often as you like,” she giggled.

“I thought you would wear the red dress I saw you in at your party.”

Cookie nudged him playfully. “And what? I only have one dress. Come on, Miles. You already saw that dress. I couldn't wear the same dress twice.”

Miles laughed. “Of course not. What was I thinking?” He palmed his forehead dramatically.

Cookie smoothed imagined wrinkles from the silky fabric that fell perfectly over her curvy figure. She smiled when she caught Miles's gaze following her hands.

“I thought sparkles and a long dress with a split suited a New Years party better than the silky red one I wore at Christmas,” she added with a wink.

“Well, you were right. This black one was a great choice. You look...wow,” he added, ogling her openly. He offered his arm with a wide grin. “Let's go inside so we can show it off.”

She nodded and slipped her arm around his. Miles guided her to the buffet. Gold rimmed plates were piled high beside roasted meats, creamy mashed potatoes and a variety of decadent desserts.

“Holy cow. The food looks amazing,” Cookie said, savoring a stuffed mushroom. “You should try these. They're fantastic. I'm officially jealous of your company's catering.”

Miles laughed. “I'm sure they got a lot of offers from people who wanted to cater this party. The magazine focuses on food and everything food related.”

“Food related?” she asked, adding meat to her plate.

“Yeah, you know, cookware, restaurants, businesses, all that kind of stuff,” he explained with a shrug.

Laughter and music filled the air. Cookie and Miles bobbed their heads to the beat of well-known Christmas tunes as they ate.

“I’m glad you came to enjoy the party with me.”

“I’m glad I did too,” she admitted, feeling the warmth of the evening settle over her.

The music shifted away from the holiday tunes to a more romantic theme. People started to fill the dance floor. Miles set down his empty plate and offered his hand to Cookie.

“Dance with me?”

She hesitated, but only for a moment, before letting him guide her to the floor. The music was soft and romantic. Miles rested his hand lightly on her waist, and Cookie placed hers on his shoulder, their movements slow and steady as they swayed together in a smooth rhythm.

“You’re a good dancer,” Cookie told him.

“Thanks.” Miles pulled her a little closer. “You know, considering how we first met, I’m a little shocked, but happy that we’re here right now,” he said, giving her a playful grin.

Cookie chuckled. “Yeah, thinking back to that day, I’m surprised, too. You were definitely doing too much, Miles.”

He feigned a wounded expression, placing a hand on his neck. “I thought I was just being... assertive.”

She rolled her eyes but couldn’t stop her smile. “Well, you definitely overshot that mark.”

“Okay, yes. I know now that it was a bit too assertive.”

Cookie lifted a brow. “A bit? It felt more like Hurricane Miles.”

He raised one hand but kept the other around her waist. “You’re right, but I did apologize for that. Multiple times, if I remember correctly.”

“True,” she admitted, her gaze softening.

“I even brought you your *favorite* coffee as a peace offering.”

“With the aid of your brother,” she pointed out.

Miles scoffed. “So now it’s wrong for a man to phone a friend?”

Cookie laughed, shaking her head. “You’ve come a long way from being that jerk in the supermarket. I’ll give you that.”

Miles smirked. "So, you're saying I'm growing on you?"

She pretended to think. "Yeah...like a stubborn weed," she teased.

"Ouch," he said, grinning. "But I'll take it. After all, we are here together dancing at my holiday party...talking about making plans for the upcoming year."

She side-eyed him "*Are we* talking about plans for the new year?"

His head tilted. "We haven't started making plans, yet?"

"I don't think so."

"Huh, maybe I planned to do that later on tonight then," he said with a soft tone. "After our first kiss," he added.

She found herself leaning in slightly. Her breath caught as he did the same.

"Oh yeah?" she whispered.

Everything around them faded away as their faces moved closer. Her pulse raced as their noses brushed, but just before their lips met, the sound of a microphone crackling to life made her jump.

"Sorry to interrupt the festivities, folks, but I've got some exciting announcements to make."

Cookie took a quick step back. "Oh, so, umm, who's that?"

Miles sighed. "That's my new boss, Mr. Gallagher."

Mr. Gallagher stood on the small platform at the front of the room, tapping the mic with a grin drawing everyone's attention. Miles sighed and chuckled softly.

"His timing needs work, too," he muttered.

Cookie swallowed her laughter as they turned to listen.

"As you know, we're welcoming new talent to our team for the New Year," Mr. Gallagher began. "Allow me to introduce them now. First up, Douglas Green will be taking over in accounting."

Polite applause filled the room as Douglas gave a small wave.

"Next, Michael Dixon will join our development team," Mr. Gallagher continued, nodding to a man near the back.

The crowd turned to see Mr. Dixon using his plate to wave.

"And finally," Mr. Gallagher's smile widened, "with my retirement coming in April, I'm proud to announce that Miles Baxter will be stepping into the role of Chief Operations Officer!"

The room erupted into cheers and applause, and Cookie turned to Miles with wide eyes.

“Chief Operations Officer? You didn’t tell me that!”

Miles shrugged, looking both shy and proud. “It wasn’t really official until now when he announced it to the company.”

“You’re full of surprises,” Cookie said, her voice warm with admiration. “Thanks everyone. Please enjoy the party and Happy New Year!”

After the applause died down, the music resumed. Several of Miles's new colleagues came by to congratulate him on his new position. Miles flitted through the crowd chit chatting with people with a firm grip on her hand as we went. After a while his natural charm showed his face. His new co-workers warmed up to him, pulling him into one conversation after another.

Cookie was just as dazzled by Miles's wit and knowledge on, not just his job, but on every topic that came up. As midnight neared, the people left him to enjoy the party with others. Miles turned back to Cookie.

“Want to finish that dance?”

She nodded, and he pulled her close again, the music wrapping around them like a warm blanket. Just as they started to move, the music stopped abruptly.

“Hey guys, it's about to happen! The last ten seconds. Get ready!” someone shouted out.

“Ten, nine, eight...”

“Out with the old, in with the new, eh?” Miles said with a wink.

Cookie nodded and continued counting with everyone else.

“Three, two, one! Happy New Year!”

Nets on the ceiling released balloons and confetti onto the people in the room. Clapping, cheers and laughter followed the many shouts of Happy New Year. Miles joined in the chorus of Auld Lang Syne that broke out among his coworkers. As soon as the song was done, the party resumed. They moved together to the smooth tones of the music once more.

“This group doesn't seem that bad if first impressions are to be believed,” Miles said looking around the room.

“Hmm, after the way we met, I would think you would no longer be a fan of going off first impressions,” Cookie reminded him with a grin.

Miles twisted his lips. “Hmm, good point. I'll just feel them out over the next few months.”

Cookie nodded. “Good plan.”

They glided across the floor effortlessly. Miles looked up suddenly and smiled.

“Hey, looky what we have here.”

“What?” Cookie looked up and then back at him. “Oh.”

“You’re not the kind of woman that would break a holiday tradition, are you?”

“I— I wouldn’t dream of it,” she answered barely above a whisper.

Miles’s smile softened as he leaned in. Their lips met in a gentle, lingering kiss. His grip tightened around her waist to bring her closer. The hardness of his chest pressing against her breast excited her even more. When he released her, she was breathless.

“So, what do you say? We can officially leave the supermarket disaster back in last year and see what’s in store for us *this* year?”

Cookie met his gaze. A flutter of anticipation waved through her. Miles lifted his hand.

“I promise, no more *Hurricane Miles* situations. Just good cookies, good times and a few good surprises along the way,” he added quickly.

She stopped dancing. “Surprises?” she repeated with wide eyes.

“Yup, but you’ll just have to wait to see what those are,” he said, playfully.

“Aww,” she said with faux disappointment.

Miles lifted her chin and brought his face down to hers. “Don’t worry. You’ll enjoy being my girlfriend,” he promised, leaving another kiss on her lips.

Cookie lifted a brow. “Have you asked me to be your girlfriend?”

Miles tilted his head. “I haven’t asked you to be my girlfriend, yet?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Hmm, I must have planned to ask you later on tonight.”

“Maybe you should ask me now, just to make it official. I mean, I did meet you last year, after all,” she said with a sly grin.

Miles threw his head back and laughed. When he composed himself, he took her hands and kissed her knuckles.

“You are absolutely right. We are here right now and there’s no better time than the present and all that. Right?”

Cookie chuckled. “Right.”

“The more I get to know about you, the more I like you, Cookie. I would love for you to be my girlfriend.”

She snickered. “Well, I guess I have no choice since I’m curious about those surprises.”

Miles chuckled. “Great! We’ll talk about pet names later,” he added, giving her a quick kiss.

Miles continued dancing her around the floor. She giggled and melted into his embrace looking forward to the new year.

THE END

A gift for the readers.
Merry Christmas!

Grandma Beverly's Peppermint Brownies

Ingredients

FOR THE BROWNIES:

- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, melted
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 4 large eggs
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon peppermint extract
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 teaspoon salt

For the Peppermint Glaze:

- 1 cup powdered sugar
- 2 tablespoons milk (or more as needed)
- 1/2 teaspoon peppermint extract
- Crushed candy canes

Instructions

1. PREPARE THE BROWNIES:

1. Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C). Grease or line an 8x8-inch baking pan with parchment paper.
2. In a large mixing bowl, whisk together the melted butter and sugar until smooth.
3. Add the eggs one at a time, mixing well after each addition. Stir in the vanilla and peppermint extracts.

4. Sift in the flour, cocoa powder, baking powder, and salt. Gently fold the dry ingredients into the wet mixture until just combined. Avoid overmixing.
5. If using chocolate chips, fold them in.
6. Pour the batter into the prepared pan and spread it evenly. Bake for 30-35 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out with a few moist crumbs.

2. Prepare the Peppermint Glaze:

1. While the brownies cool, whisk together the powdered sugar, milk, and peppermint extract in a small bowl until smooth. Adjust the consistency with more milk if needed.

3. Assemble:

1. Once the brownies have cooled completely, spread the glaze evenly over the top.
2. Sprinkle crushed candy canes over the glaze for a festive touch.
3. Let the glaze set for about 15 minutes before cutting into squares.

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About the Author

As a young child, I wrote Hickory Dickory Dock type poetry as I doodled all over my papers in school. I still don't know which I did more, but by Jr. high school I wrote more than doodled and even got up the nerve to enter them in a contest or two. But it was my short stories that took all my time and energy.

I showed a few to my friends and they had me doing weekly installments of a story and had passed it around the lunch room. During the 80's; when I was in High School, I tried my hand at rapping. Rap Music was just a toddler with the arrival of the Sugar Hill Gang a few years back and everyone wanted to Rap. So with my 'crew' The Puma Fly Girls, (come on, you had a weird crew name too), we rapped and I wrote the rhymes for myself as Shorty Dee Ski and for another of my girls in my crew. (Don't Laugh. If you are a child of the 80's you were some kind of 'ski' too.)

In 2003, I picked up my pen again and I haven't put it down. Come along for the ride as I go on an imaginary trip into my world. You'll enjoy every minute of this wild ride.

Read more at <https://www.danalittlejohn.com/>.



About the Publisher

I invite you into my world with open arms to see my imagination run wild...

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